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SUBJECT: BACHELET'S CUBA TRIP TO EMPHASIZE CULTURAL TIES,  
PURPORTEDLY ENHANCE RELATIONS WITH MODERATES

REF: SANTIAGO 044

Classified By: E/Pol Counselor Juan Alsace for reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) During a farewell call January 12, departing E/Pol Counselor raised with Ambassador Carlos Appelgren, Director of the MFA's Office for North American and Caribbean Affairs, the upcoming February 2009 visit to Cuba of President Bachelet (reftel). E/Pol Counselor noted press reports that Bachelet would not meet with Cuban dissidents who had reportedly requested an audience with her. Given the President's own personal experience with violation of human rights during the Pinochet regime, and Chile's wider history of disappearances and torture during the 1970s and 1980s, what was the President's--and the GOC's--thinking in failing to take an opportunity to reach out to those who were experiencing the same today in Cuba?

¶2. (C) Appelgren replied that Chile faced a delicate internal political situation. While some within her own governing coalition are pressing for a meeting with the dissidents (the centrist Christian Democrats), others within the Concertacion (the left-leaning Socialists) are equally adamant that she not. Bachelet had been under pressure from Socialists who admired the Castro regime to visit Cuba almost from the time she had taken office in March 2006. She had resisted because Cuba remains a hot button issue for the Chileans. But Bachelet is committed to visiting all the countries in the hemisphere during her presidency and only Honduras (which she will visit this year) and Cuba remain. She had chosen as a reason for going Chile's selection as the country to be honored at Cuba's international book fair. The visit is "cultural" and strictly non-political.

¶3. (C) Appelgren continued that Chile saw an opportunity to influence a new cadre within Cuba--the mid-level decision-makers who would be in power after Fidel and Raul pass from the scene--through such a visit. They are pragmatic and want to see Cuba opening up to the world; being involved in state visits with moderate leftists like Bachelet would help facilitate that process. E/Pol Counselor argued that a visit by Bachelet that did not include a meeting with dissidents could send the opposite signal; that the GOC would look the other way as these "pragmatists" consolidated their hold on power.

¶4. (C) Appelgren also said Chile strictly respected the protocol imposed by the host country. It would make suggestions on meetings--as it did when it sought exchanges with legally sanctioned opposition groups or parties in visits to Mexico and Canada. But there was no such legal opposition in Cuba he observed without irony. Appelgren ducked the question when asked if the GOC had made any "suggestion" that Bachelet meet with Cuban dissidents, as he did when asked if Bachelet would at least make some public statement regarding Cuba's human rights record. He did note Bachelet would meet with Bishop Jaime Ortega, who has contacts with Cuban dissidents.

15. (C) Comment: Our view here is that Bachelet wants to make this trip badly - her "inner Socialist" is being given free rein - and she will not do anything likely to upset her hosts. End comment.  
SIMONS